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SUBJECT: KOSOVO NGO'S RECEIVE TRAINING IN SLOVAKIA

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¶1. Summary: A four-day conference May 17-20 brought Kosovo NGO leaders to Bratislava for training and discussions about "the role of NGO's in a society undergoing transition." In a conference partly funded by SlovakAid, the NGO leaders named the desire for EU membership as the motivating goal for their reform efforts. MFA PolDir responded to accusations that Slovak foreign policy was biased in favor of Serbia, and encouraged the NGO leaders to focus on showing that Kosovo is ready to take its future into its own hands. The event was an example of Slovakia's contribution to "transformational diplomacy," and the MFA plans to ask NGO's active in the Balkans to increase such programs. End summary.

¶2. The Slovak NGO "People in Peril" is active in providing humanitarian assistance and supporting democratic development in countries outside Slovakia, including Cuba and the Western Balkans. Supported in part with funding from SlovakAid (the foreign aid arm of the MFA), People in Peril hosted 27 NGO leaders from Kosovo, both Albanians and Serbs, for a four-day series of roundtable discussions to learn from the experience of Slovak NGO experts on the role of NGOs in a society undergoing transition. This May 17-20 event was significant because, although Slovakia considers the Western Balkans a foreign policy priority, it was the first time a group of Kosovars has been able to visit Slovakia in the post-conflict period. There were significant logistical challenges because Slovakia's Ministry of the Interior does not recognize UNMIK travel documents, and it took over a month to arrange visas.

¶3. One element of the visit was a half-day conference on "Kosovo Today--Views from Inside and Outside." On the first panel, five speakers from Kosovo-based NGO's described their work. A common theme was that independence for Kosovo is but a step on the road to the ultimate goal: membership in the European Union. All speakers expressed frustration with the current economic stagnation, restriction of movement, and incompetence of local leaders. There was pessimism that Pristina and Belgrade could negotiate a solution, and an expectation that the international community would "impose" a final status. All agreed that the best task for NGOs was to focus on fulfilling the "standards" so that, no matter what final status looks like, Kosovo will be closer to European norms.

¶4. In the second panel, Slovak NGO experts and MFA Political Director Miroslav Lajcak described Slovakia's views of Kosovo. Milan Nic of the Pontis Foundation criticized Slovak foreign policy as unbalanced because although the country has strong historical links to Croatia and Serbia, as one moves further south, expertise dissipates. Nonetheless, Slovakia's knowledge and reputation were improving, and the role of Lajcak as EU envoy in Montenegro was proof. On the other hand, Nic said, Slovakia was at a distinct disadvantage in

trying to influence Kosovo policy since it is not represented in the contact group, nor on Ahtisaari's team. Lajcak countered that Ahtisaari consulted regularly with UNSC members and that Slovakia had contributed ideas and opinions.

15. Lajcak's message was consistent with what he recently told U.S. officials:

--The quality of the process for resolving status talks is important. All actors must participate. There should be no big winners or big losers. The talks should not be artificially prolonged nor speeded up.
--Just as removing Saddam Hussein did not instantly solve all of Iraq's problems, final status would not resolve all of Kosovo's problems
--Core values in society, such as tolerance and respect for the rule of law, depended on Kosovars themselves and not the international community.

Lajcak was impassioned as he urged the NGO participants from Kosovo, "Leave politics to the politicians, but be the mirror for them. Maybe they won't like what they see reflected back and will change. Focus on improving the lives of citizens. Show positive signals that Kosovo is ready to be a serious partner and take its future in its own hands."

16. One Kosovar participant asked whether the opposition of the Slovak public to NATO airstrikes against Serbia was reflected in the pro-Serb prejudice of Slovak foreign policy. Lajcak rejected the accusation and said Slovakia aimed to be balanced. It could soon open a Liaison Office in Pristina. He pointed out the advantage that Slovakia had in being considered an "honest broker" by Belgrade. He assured the participants that Slovak leaders have tough, direct conversations with Serb leaders, including messages like, "Don't look back. Face reality. Be part of the solution,

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not the problem."

17. The event was an excellent example of Slovakia's own "transformational diplomacy" efforts. The MFA will follow up on May 29 by meeting with Slovak NGO's active in the Balkans to ask them to re-double such efforts.
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